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ABSTRACT

Analysis of surveys administered each year by the Radio-Television News Directors Association to news directors throughout the country reveals that a number of changes have occurred since 1972. The number of women and college graduates who are news directors has increased, although the median age of news directors, 38 in television and 31 in radio in 1985, has changed little. In addition, news director job turnover has increased. Median time in their present jobs, 2.2 years in television and 1.8 in radio in 1985, was approximately one year less than the time reported by survey respondents in 1972. Local news became an increasing money-maker, more so in television than in radio. On the average, television staffs doubled in size, while radio news staffs remained unchanged. Television news directors' salaries in 1985 were twice as large as those of radio news directors. Many news directors reported that if they left broadcast news, it would most likely be for professional advancement or better salaries. The results suggest that news director turnover, which may be partially attributed to the fact that local news has become a major source of revenue, may lower standards of professionalism. However, opportunities for news directors to become station managers are growing. It appears that television holds more potential for aspiring journalist-managers than does radio. (Tables of data are included.) (DF)

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THE CHANGING PROFILES OF BROADCAST NEWS DIRECTORS

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A B S T R A C T

THE CHANGING PROFILES OF BROADCAST NEWS DIRECTORS

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National surveys of news directors at commercial television and radio stations, conducted from 1972 to 1985, showed increases in the numbers who were women and college graduates. The median age of news directors -- 38 in television and 31 in radio last year -- changed little.

News director job turnover increased. Median time in their present jobs -- 2.2 years in television and 1.8 in radio in 1985 -- was about one year less than in 1972.

TV news directors shifted their primary activity from journalism to management, but radio news directors continued to spend most of their time on news. Local news increasingly became a money-maker, more so in television than in radio. TV news staffs typically doubled in size during the 13-year period, while radio news staffs remained essentially unchanged. News directors' salaries in 1985 were twice as great in television as in radio, where pay had steadily fallen behind.

If news directors left broadcast news, they said, it would most likely be for professional advancement or better salaries. Radio news directors became more likely and TV news directors less likely to see salaries as potentially driving them to another occupation.

It was concluded that news director turnover, a result of local news becoming a major source of revenue, may threaten professionalism. At the same time, opportunities for news directors to become station managers are growing. Television news holds potential for aspiring journalist-managers, but most radio news directorships are probably best treated as stepping stones.

THE CHANGING PROFILES OF BROADCAST NEWS DIRECTORS

Television and radio news directors are among society's lesser known influentials. They are the primary persons who set the policies, coordinate the news staffs and guide the coverage that determine what TV and radio audiences see and hear about their communities and the world. Like editors of newspapers, news directors of broadcast stations manage personnel, budgets, technology and news coverage. Many, particularly in radio and small-market television, are known to the public through their on-air reporting. But in their roles as news directors, they are known mainly to their staffs. Who are these journalist-managers?

Data addressing that question have been accumulating since 1972, when the author was assigned by the Radio-Television News Directors Association to conduct a national survey of news directors. That led to other RTNDA surveys, at least one a year since. While results have regularly been disseminated to media practitioners and the general public through trade publications and mass media, most have not been brought together in a scholarly context.

Present research literature provides little information on news directors. Fang and Gerval published a 1970 survey of TV news directors on salaries and favored attributes in new reporters.[1] Smith has assessed

news directors' attitudes toward newsgathering technology.[2] Barrett has described their experiences with news consultants, but his DuPont-Columbia University broadcast journalism survey volumes have generally dealt with reporting and news programs rather than the managers of news operations.[3] Broadcasting magazine has also long featured an annual roundup of local broadcast news achievements, but with little description of news directors.[4]

As long ago as 1968, Skornia questioned that true professionalism could be achieved by news directors and other broadcasters in view of their high job turnover and lack of tenure.[5] The frequency of their moves from station to station has increased in recent years and brought much concern, as documented in RTNDA surveys[6] and such sources as Variety.[7] Near the end of his 35 years in charge of the news operation at WTVJ, Miami, the dean of TV news directors, Ralph Renick, told his colleagues that the public is not well served when news directors "become involuntary nomads and move from place to place, unable to put down roots."[8]

Though moves are most often from one news operation to another, news directors are increasingly moving from the newsroom to the front office. General managers surveyed in 1982 were asked: "Do you see your news director as a potential station manager, here or elsewhere?" Yes was the response by 45 percent of the TV and 33 percent of the radio general managers. The great majority of the GMs had come up through sales, with only 7 percent in television and 4 percent in radio reporting a backgound mainly in news. While most still saw the sales manager as the department head most likely to become a general manager, a fifth of the GMs, both in television and radio, saw their news directors as the most likely prospect.[9]

The research reported here describes changes in TV and radio news directors in the past 14 years, examines apparent factors in their job turnover and looks to their future.

METHOD

RTNDA surveys, including the ones drawn upon in the present study, have used essentially the same method from the first in 1972 to the most recent in 1985. Usually in summer, questionnaires were mailed to news directors at the population of non-satellite commercial TV stations and at a systematic random sample of commercial radio stations with working addresses in the current Broadcasting Yearbook. Combined AM-FM news operations indicated by the yearbook received but one questionnaire per mailing. To assure that a second mailing went only to non-respondents, the first mailing's questionnaires were marked with station call letters before mailing. Identification was left blank on questionnaires mailed in the second wave, but at least 95 percent of these respondents normally filled in the information. Confidentiality was assured in a cover letter on RTNDA letterhead.

The number of non-satellite commercial TV stations grew from 630 in 1972 to about 750 in 1985. The sampling rate for radio, selected to provide respondents numbering within 100 of those for television, moved from every sixth of about 4,100 qualifying news operations in 1972 to every eighth of about 6,800 in 1985, after random starts. Response rates were stable across the years, ranging from 60 to 65 percent for television and 42 to 48 percent for radio in the surveys yielding data for the present paper. Numbers of cases ranged from 406 to 453 for television and from 330 to 405 for radio.

RESULTS

Basic Demographics

A sex change took place in many news directorships between 1972 and 1985, as women moved into newsroom management. The news directors surveyed last year were more likely to be women than were the ones in 1972, when only two of 406 TV respondents and about 5 percent of the radio news directors were female. As Table 1 shows, female respondents constituted about 10 percent of last year's total in television and 21 percent in radio.

Racially, most news directors are white. Members of minority groups made up only about 3 percent of last year's respondents, little more than in 1982. (The information was not ascertained in earlier surveys.)

Typical age has remained about the same. The median age of TV news directors last year was about 38 years compared to 36 in 1972. The typical radio news director in the 1985 survey was 31 years old compared to a median of 30 for those surveyed in 1972.

Today's news directors are much more likely to be college graduates than were the ones in the early 1970s. College graduates increased from 56 percent of all TV news directors in 1972 to 76 percent in 1985. In radio, 36 percent of the news directors surveyed in 1972 and 64 percent of the ones last year had college degrees.

There's a good chance a news director's college major was journalism, radio-television or communication. When asked their majors in the 1976 survey, 37 percent of the TV news directors said journalism, 21 percent named radio-television or another communication area, and 16 percent said social studies. Among radio news directors with degrees, 28 percent had majored in journalism, 24 percent in broadcasting or communication and 15 percent in social studies. Similar results had been found in 1972.

TABLE 1: The Changing Profiles of Broadcast News Directors

	1972	1976	1982	1985
Television				
Male	99.5%	96.4%	92.4%	89.8%
White	NA	NA	98.2%	96.9%
Median age	36.0	35.7	35.5	37.6
College graduates	56.2%	64.0%	76.5%	75.9%
Median years in news	NA	12.7	13.9	14.1
Years managerial	4.9	4.7	5.2	6.1
Years news director here	3.3	2.4	2.0	2.2
Median full-time staff	9.5	10.5	16.7	18.4
Median total staff	10.5	12.0	19.2	20.4
Median weekly salary	$250	$325	$565	$680
Number of cases	406	415	450	453
Radio				
Male	96.4%	91.5%	82.5%	79.2%
White	NA	NA	96.2%	96.6%
Median age	30.0	28.7	30.1	30.9
College graduates	36.5%	51.4%	55.7%	63.7%
Median years in news	NA	6.5	6.2	6.6
Years managerial	4.5	2.9	2.7	3.3
Years news director here	2.7	1.9	1.6	1.8
Median full-time staff	1.8	1.2	1.3	1.4
Median total staff	2.8	2.5	2.3	2.2
Median weekly salary	$150	$185	$275	$300
Number of cases	346	330	350	405

While the item has not been included in surveys during the 1980s, there is no apparent reason to expect substantial change.

Professional Experience

Years of news experience for the typical news director changed little from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. That's consistent with the median age staying about the same. Last year's TV news directors had been working in news a median of about 14 years, compared to six and a half years for radio news directors. The medians in 1976 were about 13 years for television and six years for radio.

TV news directors surveyed in 1985 typically had six years of experience in managing news operations, about a year more than the ones in 1972. But in radio, last year's respondents' median of three and a half years of managerial experience was one year less than for those in the 1972 survey.

News directors were changing stations more in 1985 than in 1972. As Table 1 details, TV news directors last year had been in their present jobs a little more than two years, one full year less than the survey respondents in 1972. Similarly in radio, news directors last year typically had been on the job just under two years, which was about a year less than those in the early 1970s. Even so, time on the same job was up slightly last year from the 1982 low of two years for TV and roughly a year and a half for radio news directors.

Since getting into broadcast news, the typical TV news director of 1985 had worked at 4.3 stations and averaged 3.3 years each. The median stay per city was 3.8 years. The small difference between median years per station and per city indicates that most job changes by TV news directors require moving from one city to another.

Radio news directors last year had worked at a median of 3.3 stations, an average of two years per station and three years per city. Typically, therefore, one station change in radio news is within the same market.

The 1985 findings were consistent with the 1972 finding that less than a tenth of the news directors had come from a different station in the same market. In television, about 40 percent had moved from a station in another market and a third had been promoted from within. In radio, nearly half had come from a station in another market and one in five had been promoted at the present station.

On the Job

Most of the persons in charge of broadcast news operations are called news directors, quite often with the additional title of public affairs director. In television, titles changed little from 1972 to 1984, the last year that such information was gathered in an RTNDA survey. As Table 2 shows, almost nine of every 10 TV news chiefs were called news directors. About one of every 20 was a vice president for news or held a comparable title such as assistant general manager/news director. There was a small gain in news vice presidencies in television from 1972 to 1984. In radio, the portion of news operations headed by a news director increased from 70 percent to 81 percent. Vice presidents for news remained rare in radio.

General managers and program directors who do double duty as news directors were fairly common in radio in 1984, though less so than in 1972. Some of the general managers had moved up from news director and retained their news duties.

TABLE 2: Titles of Persons in Charge of News Operations

	Television		Radio	
	1972	1984	1972	1984
News Director	87.5%	88.8%	69.8%	81.2%
VP, News	3.1	4.7	1.0	.3
General Manager	1.6	1.3	14.9	9.7
Program Director	1.8	.4	8.3	6.0
Operations Mgr.	1.8	.4	2.0	1.3
Other	4.2	4.2	3.9	1.6
Total	100.0%	99.9%	99.9%	100.1%
Number of cases	383	448	302	319

TV news directors' responsibilities grew from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s. As Table 1 shows, the median news staff in 1985 consisted of about 18 full-time and two part-time persons, roughly twice the size of the typical 1972 staff. In addition, it has beome evident to station management that TV news, once a financial loser, now can be a station's primary local money-maker. About three-fourths of the stations were making money and only 8 percent were losing it on news in 1985, whereas 27 percent said they were losing money on news in 1972. News directors are now expected to deliver the ratings which mean dollars. In recent years, they have also had to learn to manage increased newsroom and newsgathering technology.[10]

As a result, TV news directors have shifted their time increasingly from journalistic to managerial activities. The years have brought major changes in responses to the survey question: "On which do you spend more time? News (reporting, etc.)? Administration (paperwork, personnel, etc)? About the same on both?" TV news directors spending more time on administrative/managerial duties increased from 22 percent of the total in 1972 to 42 percent in 1983 and 53 percent in 1985. Those spending more time on news decreased from 39 percent in 1972 to 27 percent in 1983 and 12 percent last year. The others -- 39 percent in 1972, 31 percent in 1983 and 34 percent last year -- said they spent about as much time on one as the other.

While TV news was flourishing, radio news was barely holding its own. As Table 1 shows, the typical radio news staff reported in 1972 was about half a person larger than in 1985, when the medians were 1.4 full-time and .8 part-time news personnel. That difference must be approached cautiously because some inflation of the 1972 staff size figures may have resulted from question wording, which was made more precise in the surveys

for 1976 and later. But even with the cautious interpretation of not claiming a decrease from 1972, the medians for other years make clear that radio news staffs, on the average, have not grown in recent years.

News was making money at 41 percent of the radio stations surveyed last year, losing money at 14 percent and coming out even at 45 percent. Twenty-nine percent were losing money in 1972. This indicates that news was at least as prosperous for radio in 1985, though (or because?) less money may have been going back into news.

Few radio news directors are primarily managers. Most radio news operations are too small for that. When a respondent at a small operation said he or she spent more time on administrative duties than news, it usually indicated double duty as program director or general manager. In 1985, only 8 percent of the radio news directors were primarily managerial, 61 percent were primarily news and 31 were as much one as the other. Little change has taken place over the years.

Salaries for radio news directors fell behind in comparison to TV news directors. As Table 1 shows, the median weekly salaries for news directors in 1972 were $150 for radio and $250 for TV. That's two-thirds more for television. But in 1985, medians were $300 for radio and $680 for TV news directors -- more than twice as much for television. While the median salaries of news directors increased by 272 percent (not far from tripling) in television, they only doubled during the 13-year period in radio.

Future for News Directors

Salaries have been mentioned increasingly by radio news directors in response to: "If you left broadcast news, what do you think would be the main reason(s)? Salary? Working conditions? Professional

advancement? Other?" As Table 3 shows, more than half of the radio respondents in 1983 checked salary, compared to 45 percent in 1976. TV news directors, meanwhile, were seeing salaries as becoming less of a problem. More than a third of the TV respondents in 1976, but less than a third in 1983 saw salary as potentially forcing them to another field.

Professional advancement was checked most often as a likely motivation for a professional change. More than half of 1983's news directors, both in television and radio, cited that as a primary reason they might get out. Results were similar in 1976.

Working conditions came in third as a reason news directors might leave broadcast journalism. About a fourth of the TV and a fifth of the radio respondents in both 1976 and 1983 checked "working conditions."

What kind of jobs do news directors think they might take if they left broadcast news? That question had not been asked in recent surveys, but a survey of TV news directors in 1973 brought public relations as the number-one response. Twenty-six percent said they would most likely go into public relations if they left TV news, 18 percent said management and 12 percent said news in another medium. When asked where their predecessors had gone, 42 percent of the TV news directors said news at another station; 15 percent, public relations; 11 percent, other media work; 7 percent, government or politics; and 6 percent, media management.[11]

DISCUSSION

Two of the most significant changes in news directors since the early 1970s are that they now have more education and are more likely to be women. But while women have moved into the management of news operations, members of minority groups have made almost no progress. The percentages

TABLE 3: Reasons News Directors Might Leave News

	Television		Radio	
	1976	1983	1976	1983
Professional advancement	49.2%	55.8%	57.4%	54.3%
Salary	37.8	29.9	44.9	51.6
Working conditions	23.4	24.9	19.5	20.6
Other reasons	20.7	21.9	14.3	14.9
*Total	131.1%	132.5%	136.1%	141.4%
Number of cases	415	432	330	371

of minority news directors were practically as tiny in 1985 as in 1972. This is consistent with overall employment in broadcast news. While the female proportion of the work force has increased dramatically, minorities have barely held their own since the early 1970s.[12]

The job of news director has become less attractive to the person who would like to stay at the same station for more than two or three years. News directors are appropriately being called nomads.[13] The great majority are not staying in one place long enough really to get to know the communities their staffs are assigned to cover. Frequent moves from city to city may also tend to disrupt family life and make the job unattractive to some of the potentially best professionals.

Headlines in Variety regularly reflect the major-market turnover: "WCBS-TV Chief Walks Plank as News Ratings Remain Down" (2/23/83, p. 41); "WSB-TV Fires Its News Chief As Atlanta Race Remains Tight" (3/30/83, p. 97); "News Dir. Ousted at WSB-TV Atlanta; Start of a Shakeup" (1/23/85, p. 52). Keep in mind that a median of 2.2 years on the job for TV news directors means that half (including one at WSB-TV) left sooner.

In television, the turnover can be seen as a product of the success of news in attracting audiences and advertisers. Since the early 1970s, TV news staffs have doubled and news has beome a primary money maker. When ratings slip or consultants' reports indicate a need for new leadership, news directors tend to move. In radio, they are more likely to move because of low salaries or disenchantment with station management that tries to make more money on news by putting less back into it.

The duties of the surviving TV news directors will continue to shift from primarily journalistic to managerial. They will spend more time managing personnel, budgets and technology than working with news. Such is a result of news becoming big business in stations' financial

structure. Broadcast journalism students who aspire to become news directors might well include appropriate business courses in their studies.

More and more news directors can be expected to move up to station management. Particularly in television, they are gaining managerial experience in their stations' prosperous showcase department. No longer can sales managers be considered the only ones who really understand what it takes to turn a profit. News directors at the majority of TV stations are now expected to deliver a product that is competitive in the ratings. Those with the ambition and ability to move on to greater financial rewards will increasingly become general managers rather than public relations practitioners.

Trends emerging from the series of RTNDA surveys are generally consistent with future trends predicted in a 1984 study conducted for RTNDA by Frank N. Magid Associates. When Magid's interviewers asked TV station managers where the biggest budget allocation increases would be in the next 10 years, 84 percent said the news department, that gave news the most mentions among competitors for resources within stations. But when radio station managers were asked the same question, only 50 percent named news, which came in behind equipment, promotion and the sales department. The future holds promise in television news, but is not bright in radio news. Being a news director at the majority of radio stations is probably best treated as a stepping stone to station management, television news or both.

FOOTNOTES

1 Irving E. Fang and Frank W. Gerval, "A Survey of Salaries and Hiring Preferences in Television News," Journal of Broadcasting, 15:421-433 (Fall 1971).

2 Conrad Smith, "Newsgathering Technology and the Content of Local Television News," Journal of Broadcasting, 28:99-102 (Winter 1984).

3 Marvin Barrett, "The Trojan Horse: News Consultants," in Marvin Barrett, ed., Moments of Truth? The Fifth Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia University Survey of Broadcast Journalism (New York: Crowell, 1975), pp. 89-112. Other volumes in the series edited by Barrett have been published by Grossett & Dunlap (New York) in 1969, 1970 and 1971 and by Crowell in 1973, 1978, 1980 and 1982.

4 See, for example: "Local TV Journalism '85," Broadcasting, Vol. 109 (August 26, 1985), pp. 39-98.

5 Harry J. Skornia, Television and the News: A Critical Appraisal (Palo Alto: Pacific Books, 1968), pp. 193-217.

6 See, for example: Vernon A. Stone, "Staff Turnover Survey," RTNDA Communicator, Vol. 37 (March 1983), pp. 27-29; and Vernon A. Stone, "News Staffs Change Little in Size," RTNDA Communicator, Vol. 40 (March 1986), pp. 14-15.

7 Kevin Goldman, "News Directors' Nomadic Life Impacts Local TV Journalism," Variety, February 5, 1986, pp. 48, 136.

8 Ralph Renick, "A Little Song, a Little Dance, and Film at 11," The Quill, Vol. 73 (April 1985), pp. 12-13.

9 Vernon A. Stone, "Make the News Director a GM?" Broadcast Management/Engineering, Vol. 18 (November 1982), pp. 77-82.

10 Smith, loc. cit.

11 Vernon Stone and Deborah Hayes, "The TV News Director as an Administrator," Broadcast Financial Journal, Vol. 4 (February 1976), pp. 7-9.

12 Vernon A. Stone, "Women Gain But Minorities Barely Hold Their Own in Their Share of Broadcast News Jobs," RTNDA Communicator, Vol. 37 (April 1983), pp. 18-21.

13 Goldman, op. cit., p. 48; Renick, op. cit., p. 13.

14 Frank N. Magid Associates, Inc., "Future Trends in Broadcast Jouranlism," Unpublished report presented to Radio-Television News Directors Association, Washington, D. C., June 1984, pp. 12, 31.